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### Deposited in DRO:

03 November 2020

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Damlé, Amaleena (2013) 'Towards a poetics of reconciliation : humans and animals in Ananda Devi's writing.', *International journal of Francophone studies.*, 15 (3). pp. 497-516.

### Further information on publisher's website:

[https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.15.3-4.497<sub>1</sub>](https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.15.3-4.497_1)

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## **Towards a Poetics of Reconciliation: humans and animals in Ananda Devi's writing**

Amaleena Damlé

### **Author Biography**

Amaleena Damlé is Research Fellow in French at Girton College, Cambridge. Her research interests lie in intersections between modern and contemporary thought and literature, with a particular emphasis on gender and sexuality. Her monograph – *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* – forthcoming in 2013 with Edinburgh University Press – considers articulations of female corporeality in contemporary works by four female authors, in dialogue with Deleuzian philosophy and recent (post)feminist and queer thought. She is also the author of several articles on Nina Bouraoui, Marie Darrieussecq, Ananda Devi and Amélie Nothomb, and the co-editor of *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture* (Lang, 2010). Currently, she is beginning work on a new book project that looks at notions of love, desire and ethics in modern and contemporary French culture, and is co-editing, with Professor Gill Rye, three forthcoming volumes of articles on women's writing in twenty-first century France.

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## **Abstract**

This article analyses the flux of metamorphosis that is richly evoked in the literary works of the Mauritian-born writer Ananda Devi and that testifies both to the radical positions of alterity experienced by her various protagonists and to the political and poetical possibilities involved in reimagining boundaries between humans and animals. Placing *Moi, l'interdite* and *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's theorizations of bare life (1998) and Judith Butler's expositions on precarious life (2004), the article explores the multiple tensions at play in Devi's depictions of the human-animal. Devi's writing neither exclusively relegates the human-animal to an abject debasement, nor excessively celebrates the hybrid as a revolutionary figure. At times basely stripped of their humanity, at others tantalizingly transgressive, and often both, Devi's metamorphic protagonists are intricately and subtly bound up with the political layerings and divisions of postcolonial Mauritian society, all the while hinting towards a poetics of reconciliation that emerges in an acknowledgment of shared vulnerability.

## **Keywords**

animal

bare life

Devi, Ananda

human

metamorphosis

vulnerability

## Article

Born in 1957 in Trois-Boutiques in Mauritius, Ananda Devi is a critically acclaimed writer who has produced a diverse range of literary texts over the last three decades, including short stories, novels, poetry and essays. Devi holds a PhD in anthropology and ethnology from the School of African and Oriental Studies in London, and she has also worked as a translator. Though she commenced writing fiction at an early age, Devi began to devote her time in earnest to literary pursuits in the 1980s, with her first novel *Rue la poudrière* appearing in 1989. Since then, her work has been published variously with Indian Ocean, African and French presses, and after a period of time with Gallimard's 'Continents noirs' series, her texts now appear alongside established and canonical authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, André Gide, Marcel Proust and Jean-Paul Sartre in their prestigious 'Collection blanche' (see Waters 2008, for an analysis of postcolonial publishing politics in relation to Devi's work). Devi, who currently lives and works in Switzerland, is known for her lyrical explorations of liminal positions of identity. Her sensitive treatment of themes such as marginality, difference and suffering has drawn in a diverse Francophone readership in Mauritius, in metropolitan France and abroad. Devi's work has also been lauded on several occasions, including an award of the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie in 2006 for *Ève de ses décombres*.

Devi's writing is intimately tied to her native Mauritius and to exploring the political and cultural inequalities of this island with its complexly constructed postcolonial society. For the island of Mauritius claims a distinctive status in colonial history: unlike the Caribbean archipelago and unlike Madagascar, the inhabitants of

Mauritius have no claim to a homogeneous pre-colonial identity (Hawkins 2007: 93). Arabic and Portuguese explorers were linked to the island during medieval times, followed by Dutch settlers from the late 1500s, colonial rule by France from 1735 to 1810, and finally Britain who ruled until Mauritius achieved independence in 1968. The colonial era saw an influx of slaves and plantation owners, whose descendents now make up the Mauritian Creole population; after the abolition of slavery in 1835, indentured labourers were brought in from China, Malaya, Africa and, most prominently, in the form of the British Raj's 'coolie' workers from India. In a space where different communities have assembled, the demarcation of a specific 'Mauritian' identity or culture becomes a fraught exercise. As Srilata Ravi observes, 'The fact that there was no indigenous population in Mauritius means that all Mauritians are immigrants [...] Each successive wave added a new layer to an existing complex cultural, socioeconomic and political milieu' (Ravi 2007: 2). Modern Mauritian society is comprised of a diverse collection of ethnic backgrounds, socio-political and religious allegiances, and though French, English and Creole are the main languages, Telegu, Tamil, Hindi, Bhojpuri and Chinese are just some of the other twenty-two languages that can be heard on this island.

This composite society gives rise to complex relations between identity and difference, belonging and marginalization within the postcolonial context. On the one hand, there is a strong sense of identification in communities with their particular ethnic, religious or linguistic heritages, which has served to forge a segregated society where different social groups resist encountering one another. As Devi has commented of the Indian Mauritian community, which is the largest ethnic group in Mauritius, 'They hold onto their original identity. It is a factor of solidarity for the

group but also a factor of separation from others' (Nair 2007). Separation and segregation are important themes in Devi's writing, and many of her characters experience extreme forms of ostracization and isolation as a result of their putative 'difference' from the community. Different forms of alterity return as tropes in Devi's literature, and any deviance from the norm results in a suspended state of alienation and dislocation, which has much to reveal about the broader ruptures, divisions and hierarchies within the Mauritian universe. And yet, this postcolonial society that has formed through the persistent influx of immigration also appears to engender a hybrid form of Mauritian identity, one that might go some way to unsettle and disrupt such strict and deeply entrenched codes of belonging and difference. This rather more triumphant, rejuvenating form of hybridity, such that Homi Bhabha (1994) might advocate, is also a notion that Devi has alluded to. Devi herself is a descendent from Andhra Pradesh in India. Though she writes in French, which is the language commonly associated with creative expression in Mauritius, her linguistic range covers Telegu, Creole, French, English, Bhojpuri and Hindi. In response to a request in an interview to define her writerly identity, Devi is keen to emphasize the centrality of Mauritius in her work and to stress in particular a sense of cultural multilayering in her own conception of Mauritian identity:

On ne pouvait ni me définir en tant qu'écrivain indien, ni en tant qu'écrivain créole. Cela m'a posé des difficultés de définition personnelle jusqu'à ce que je me rende compte qu'être mauricien, c'est précisément cela: faire partie de tous ces mondes, et à travers un processus de synthèse et de syncrétisme, en extraire quelque chose de neuf et d'authentique. (Sultan 2001)

Mauritian identity, then, for Devi would seem to involve a sense of multiple attachments and belonging to a variety of cultural strands. But further, her comments underline the extent to which the idea of ‘being Mauritian’ might demand an active process of synthesis and syncretism. This is a process that involves extraction and regeneration and that signals the very formulation of subjectivity within modes of passage. Significantly, it is a process in which creativity itself would seem to play a vital role.

Devi’s writing is consistent with the range of postcolonial texts explored in this volume in the urgency of its return to the exploration of the shifting borders of the human. Yet in the Mauritian context, the dialectical discourses that emerge with regard to colonial, anti-colonial or postcolonial perspectives on the human, on humanism and on dehumanization are intriguingly displaced by multilayered and pluralized positions of, on the one hand, stigmatized difference and alterity, and of, on the other, belonging, attachment and inclusion. This article analyses representations of the human-animal in Devi’s *Moi, l’interdite* (2000) and *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* (2003) as a means of opening out perspectives both on the radical positions of alterity experienced by her protagonists and the political and poetical possibilities involved in reimagining perceived boundaries between humans and animals within the postcolonial context. Ostracized by family and the broader reaches of society on the basis of speech impediments, a harelip and a stammer that are respectively cast as physical disability and psychological instability, *Moi, l’interdite*’s Mouna and the eponymous protagonist of *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* are propelled into a slippery existence that oscillates between human and animal. Never fully inhabiting either category, however, Devi’s hesitating, hybridized human-animals participate in an

interrogation of precisely what it means to be human – physically, perceptually and ethically – in a society that is riddled with ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, sexual and other inequalities. Touching upon Giorgio Agamben’s theorizations of bare life (1998, 2004) and Judith Butler’s expositions on precarious life (2004), this article argues that multiple tensions are evoked in these reimaginings of the limits of the human, which raise a host of ethical questions and consequences in which the reader finds herself necessarily implicated.

### **Bare Life: of humans, dogs and eels**

In his critically influential *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), the philosopher Giorgio Agamben reassesses relations between humans and animals as a means of ascertaining the ways in which life comes to be recognized as such. Life, Agamben argues, as it is interrogated in philosophy, theology, politics, and, at a later stage in medicine and biology, tends to be approached as something that cannot be defined. Yet, it is precisely because of this seeming inability to attribute a definitive meaning to life, that it becomes the subject of persistent exploration, articulation, and, inevitably Agamben suggests, division. Both drawing on, and departing from Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics, Agamben proposes that the division between human and animal is always already formulated within the human itself as what he refers to as an intimate caesura. He writes:

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a ‘mobile border’ within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not



would probably not be possible. It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex – and not always edifying – economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place. (Agamben 2004: 15-6)

For Agamben, this passing of the caesura between the human and the animal within the human itself requires the very concepts of the ‘human’ and of ‘humanism’ to be approached in a different light. Rather than thinking of the human as the point at which the natural (or animal) and the social meet, Agamben argues that we must think about the incongruity of these elements and the reasons behind their separation. The question we might pose, Agamben claims, would then be the following: ‘What is man, if he is always the place – and, at the same time, the result – of ceaseless division and caesurae?’ (Agamben 2004: 16) He finds a possible answer in his reading of Linnaeus, the founder of modern scientific taxonomy: the identification of the human depends resolutely upon the ability to recognize him or herself as such, or as Agamben writes, ‘*man is the animal that must recognize itself as human in order to be human*’ (Agamben 2004: 26, original emphasis). Rather than being identified through a specific identity or substance, *homo sapiens* is thus a device or machine that produces the very recognition of the human through an optical mirroring apparatus that insists on the relation to the animal. As such, man views his image as always already deformed in the features of an ape, and must recognize himself ‘in a non-man in order to be human’ (Agamben 2004: 27).

Agamben's argument that the perceived difference between the human and the animal is a human production is deeply resonant with Devi's writing. Analysis of Mouna's transformation into a dog and Joséphin's proximity to the eel as metamorphoses that set their radical positions of alterity apart from the rest of society reveals the extent to which they reinscribe a sense of 'civilized' humanity for those around them, allowing the human to recognize itself as such through a process of identification and differentiation from the animal other. For Agamben, Western politics is founded upon precisely that which it excludes. His formulation of 'bare life' emerges from within the distinction of the natural (zoe) and the political (bios): a politicized natural life that is exposed to death in the form of sovereign violence (Agamben 1998: 85). The theorisation of bio-politics, sovereign violence and the politics of exclusion carries particular relevance within postcolonial contexts, a link that was apparent in Foucault's last lectures and that is carried through in Agamben's own work (Foucault 1997; Svirsky and Bignall 2012 for a collection of theoretical perspectives on Agamben's work and the postcolonial). Within the divisions and exclusions of Mauritian society, Mouna and Joséphin are indeed exposed to 'bare life', a life stripped of form and value. Yet, in Devi's multilayered reimagining of the human-animal there nonetheless remains some sense that such a life might, ever so subtly, resist the very terms of division that have produced it.

Born with a harelip, the narrator of *Moi, l'interdite* is associated with animality from the very beginning of her life, referred to by her family as 'la guenon' or a 'mouna', which becomes the name by which she is known. Mouna's earliest memories are bound up with her mother's profound rejection of her, a rejection that is played out in psychical and physical terms. In one image, Mouna describes the sigh of

repulsion that accompanies the mother's turning of her breast away from the child who eagerly awaits the nourishment of milk and of love (7-8); in the next she recalls being strangled by branches of ivy before realizing that the tight grip on her neck in fact belongs to 'les longs doigts flexibles de ma mère' (12). Mouna is similarly cast out from the family by her father, her brother and sisters, who all believe her deformity to be a portent of malediction: 'Il disent que je porte le signe de Shehtan. Il détournent les yeux ou prononcent des mots d'exorcisme. Donnez-moi le nom que vous voulez, rakshas, Shehtan, Satan ou autre' (9). Indeed, as the years pass, the entire village begins to view Mouna's visual sign of difference as a curse, attributing any and all misfortunes to what they perceive as her monstrous presence. As Mouna acknowledges, 'Ce fut le village tout entier. Il fallait bien qu'ils trouvent une source à leur honte' (17).

Mouna's irreducible difference precludes any possibility of belonging to her community, and the actions of her family towards her serve to exacerbate her exclusion. Her only ally is her grandmother, who cradles and comforts her, and regales her with tales, in particular the legend of Prince Bahadour and Princess Housna (21). But she too suffers from confinement, being shut away in the attic, and she is regarded as useless because of her own disability. Though she may offer Mouna love and guidance, she is helpless to change the circumstances of her suffering. Branded variously as witch, hysteric, devil and monster by those around her, Mouna is relegated to an alterity from which it is impossible to recuperate herself. And in her subjection to sexual abuse (for example, 19-20) and to violent attempts to murder her (for example, 58), her life is utterly debased and stripped of value and of meaning.

When other members of the community come to pay a visit to the family, Mouna is cast away and locked up in limekiln as a means of ensuring her invisibility (13, 33-4). That the community is shrouded in silence on the matter further enables Mouna's disappearance as a way of obscuring difference. As Mouna writes, 'Tout se sait, tout se tait. On ensevelit ce qui n'est pas pareil à soi. On le brûle à la chaux vive. On refuse de voir au-delà de l'apparence' (35). Though it may not be recognized by anyone else, Mouna is very aware of her own humanity. Further, she comprehends that her consignment to the captivity of an animal stems from the human production of the very meaning of the human through division and disavowal. If it is true that 'on ensevelit ce qui n'est pas pareil à soi', that difference is perceived on a surface level. The confinement of difference as visually perceived may thus be seen to stem from a human desire to separate from the animal within itself in a reassertion of humanity that requires the mirroring of the animal other. Mouna writes,

Les gens ont honte de la difformité des autres. Le plus curieux est qu'ils ne voient pas la leur. Pourtant, le miroir a bien dû leur en parler, à un moment ou à un autre. N'ont-ils jamais vu leur yeux torves, leur bouche rancie, leur chair tumifiée d'envies? (56)

The mirror does not disclose such images, because, following Agamben, the human itself is always already an optical machine that reflects upon the animal other in order to recognize itself precisely as human.

It is in the abject, dehumanized state of enclosure in her limekiln that Mouna gradually begins to transform from a human into a dog. At first, she is covered in

parasites, suspended in a sort of half-life as her body becomes a site of nourishment and rotting. These small beasts encase and cocoon her, nibbling away at her flesh. Insofar as they envelop and feed off her, the parasites seem to recall Mouna's family and community who have consistently confined, immobilized and vampirically asserted their own existence by sucking away at her life force. And yet, Mouna finds some semblance of contentment in this seemingly abject state. For the dependence of the parasites on her body appears to have no significance other than a need for nourishment, and Mouna herself begins to feel nourished in return by the simplicity of this relation. As she writes, 'Je nourrissais les petites bêtes, mais j'étais aussi nourrie. De silence, d'immobilité, de transparence, d'absence (47).' Mouna is thus lifted out of a life in which she is perceived as inhuman into an otherwise bare existence. Time, memory and her human sense of self begin to slip away from her, and she becomes aware of life beyond the preconditions of humanity:

Il y avait autre chose que nous. Une existence plus grave et plus somnolente que la mort me berçait. Dans cet état de demi-vie, mon esprit libéré s'est entrelacé au souffle d'une étrange création qui n'avait aucune mesure. Elle n'était ni plus vaste ni plus étroite que nous: elle était autre, et il y avait d'autres dieux pour lesquels nous étions invisibles. (46)

Despite submitting Mouna to an abject disintegration through feeding and rotting, the parasites also seem to allow her a different understanding of life, a bare existence exposed to something beyond death, but one where she offers herself and is accepted, where she is absorbed and transformed (69).

As the stench from Mouna's rotting body grows, it attracts the attention of a passing dog and it is he that sets her transformation fully in motion. Also flea-ridden and starving, Mouna imagines that this dog has been abandoned in much the same way that she has, and supposes his interest has been piqued by identification. From the outset, the dog is attributed far more humanity and empathy than any of the human characters, with the exception perhaps of the grandmother. Unlike the grandmother, however, who remains passive and helpless, the dog's empathetic relation to Mouna and desire to help her is supported by agency, lucidity and intelligence. As Mouna writes, 'Je n'avais jamais lu tant d'intelligence dans les yeux d'un être vivant' (70). The dog enters her abode, sniffing her out and having a companionable rest before going out to get water for her from a nearby puddle. When he returns he also sets about ridding Mouna of her parasites, tenderly licking her wounds to dislodge any that remain embedded in her flesh and liberating her from her confines (72). After being dragged to the puddle to wash herself, Mouna begins to recover a sense of her own corporeality. But instead of her newly cleansed state restoring her human body, Mouna finds that her liberation from the parasites has irrevocably transformed her. Suddenly, she realizes that she is no longer human: 'J'étais autre chose,' she writes, 'un être sauvage et replié qui ne pouvait plus se faire comprendre, si tant est qu'il avait jamais pu. L'essence des bêtes à la faim urgente était restée en moi. J'avais développé un esprit de meute' (72-73). Mouna is transformed by her encounter with these parasitic beasts, but her metamorphosis is also enabled by the compassion and admiration that she sees in the dog's responses to her. When she sits on all fours, and looks into the dog's eyes, she experiences something completely new: the intimacy of connection that leads to a conversation,

‘faite de silences et de sourires’, ‘une conversation d’amour’ (73), and to companionship.

Mouna’s transformation is gradual, and as long as she continues to be marked by traces of human perception, she is horrified by herself as well as by the heavy, warm canine mass beside her with its bitter stench of breath and of flesh. But after a while, the dog’s instinctual simplicity and lack of self-reflexivity begin to infiltrate her consciousness and she moves further and further away from the perceptual constraints of her human existence under the tutelage of her companion: ‘il m’a appris progressivement à interrompre ma mémoire. À penser, comme lui, uniquement avec la certitude de l’instinct. À interdire toute question. À devenir’ (94). Just as she sheds her clothes for a blanket of fur, she is uncloaked of memories of her human past. If her human body was aligned with monstrosity because of her deformity, Mouna’s animal body is graceful and alluring. Being liberated into this new animal corporeality highlights the veiled inhumanity of the human world, and of her ‘famille-monstre’ (96). It also reveals a purity of relations beyond civilized, and civilizing, society within the world of animals. As such, Mouna is able to state that she becomes a beast ‘avec grâce et grandeur’ (96). If her solitude was enforced in the human world because of her difference, her life as a dog affords belonging and attachment. As Mouna begins to forget the traumas of the past, her animal corporeality embraces a different mode of being, revealing a form of existence in which the human production of division can no longer be perceived.

In *La Vie de Joséphin le fou*, Devi returns to a strikingly similar set of questions about the boundaries of the human, the politicized divisions between human

and animal, and the possibilities of metamorphosis as offering a way out of the hierarchies of the human world. As she has acknowledged in an interview, '*Joséphin et Moi l'interdite* sont des reflets inversés l'un de l'autre. C'est quasiment la même histoire racontée de deux points de vue différents' (Ravi 2011: 274). Like Mouna, Joséphin is utterly rejected by his mother, who launches verbal tirades at him, persistently calling him mad, stupid and useless because of his stammer, and who also beats him. The misery of his mother's life is etched upon Joséphin's body, as she carves out a tableau of suffering, pain and inhumanity for him in order to recognize and reaffirm her own existence:

elle explorait sa douleur sur mon corps, j'étais son livre d'histoires, elle se rappelait sa propre existence inutile dans mes plaies, celles qui suppuraient étaient les plus vieilles, celles où le sang était rouge étaient les plus neuves, chaque plaie lui racontait ses déboires, elle pleurait dedans sans pleurer pour moi, c'était ses blessures de vie qui la faisaient pleurer. (21-2)

As in *Moi, l'interdite*, familial (or, more specifically, maternal) rejection is amplified and exacerbated by the labels of otherness that are imposed on Joséphin by the wider community. This text thus similarly discloses the dehumanization and absolute alterity that the production of human forms of identity and social structures of power demand. Joséphin is an isolated fisherman, stigmatized because of his apparent inability to communicate or assimilate. Within the community, he is known variously as 'le pêcheur fou' (40) and 'Joséphin-fou' in French, or 'Zozéfin-fouka' and 'zom-zangui' (11) (eel-man) in Creole. After a blow to the head completely strips him of language, he is cast even more resolutely as a madman and ostracized by those around



him, at which point he slips into an animal existence and becomes the eel-man that he has been so consistently labelled.

As for Mouna, despite the fact that his metamorphosis is conditioned by a politics of exclusion and consignment to bare life, Joséphin finds some semblance of solace in his marginalized existence by entering into a closer relationship with his perceived difference. However, while Mouna's transformation takes place within a space of imposed abjection, Joséphin propels himself into a natural universe that allows him to break away from the human world and its hierarchization of difference. Joséphin becomes the eel-man, half human, half animal, inhabiting the fluid space of the sea where formlessness and silence resist the mechanisms of the civilizing human world. Devi's evocative and poetic language plays on the familiar homophonic patterning of the sea and the mother, 'la mer' and 'la mère', as the sea envelops and embraces Joséphin. The language of the fullness of the warm water recalls an amniotic sense of fusion and the sea acts as a symbolic substitution for the mother, as it elastically suspends and supports Joséphin:

C'était si mou et accueillant et dense et chaud que j'ai été heureux pour la première fois. Heureux, mais heureux, aucune peur, je comprenais pas encore l'idée de la noyade, mon visage plongeait dans la rondeur de la mer et elle se séparait pour me recevoir, me rejetait pas, me giflait pas, m'assomait pas, me fendait pas la crâne, première fois qu'on m'offrait des bras, les yeux ouverts sous l'eau pour bien voir, porté par l'eau salée, si salée qu'elle était comme une main élastique soupesant mon corps, j'ai vu les couleurs de ses dessous et j'ai ri. (18)

The sea does not ask questions or make judgments, it cleanses the traces of his mother and transforms his body. Watching the movements of the fishes as they glide through the water, Joséphin sees his own body curve like a fish (19), and as he continues to inhabit the sea, he becomes more and more like an eel, ‘long et étiré et lisse et secret et noir à l’extérieur et blanc à l’intérieur et un peu élastique et un peu acide et puis surtout doué d’une longue longue mémoire’ (24). Again, like Mouna, his transformation is set in motion by physical proximity to the animal and by being covered ‘d’un onduleux tapis d’anguilles’ (24) but also by a sense of unfamiliar companionship. As he claims, ‘Je suis devenu l’ami des anguilles’ (24). The liquid rhythms of the eels open out Joséphin’s existence into the infinity of passage, a passage ‘pour sortir du monde’ (20), a passage of perpetual voyage (27). While Mouna’s metamorphosis interrupts her human perception and memory, the eels convey an alternative, elastic sense of memory to Joséphin, an instinctual movement towards origin that impels him to interrogate and to displace his own though a symbolic rejection of his mother: ‘je viens pas d’elle, ça j’en suis sûr [...] je viens de plus loin, je viens de la mer’ (49).

Joséphin’s eel-corporeality dislocates the anger and suffering of his human existence and his encounter with his own difference resists the exclusion that has been imposed on him, particularly in linguistic terms. For in the immensity, depth and silence of the sea, there are no words. Language, that has caused Joséphin so much anguish in his own inability to communicate and in the forceful linguistic labelling of alterity, becomes divested of its power to categorize, to divide and consign difference. As Joséphin dissolves into the sea, he slips away from the violent hierarchies of

human language: ‘Pas de moqueries, sous la mer. Pas de mots. Pas de mots’ (23). In an altogether different environment, his narrative voice takes on the lyrical fluidity of the ebb and flow of water, a pulsating and poetic stream of consciousness that would seem to exceed his capacities of communication in the human world. Camouflaged and disguised, Joséphin le fou turns the mockery of the town back onto itself. As police dogs search for him, suspecting he has drowned, he takes pleasure in slipping away from his social confines and into the simplicity and bare existence of an eel:

il voient rien, ils entendent rien, moi je suis couleur-roche, couleur-galet avec le silence dans la bouche et la mer qui grouille en moi, Joséphin le fou se moque bien d’eux, leur rit à la face, leur chie dessus, et puis s’en retourne vers ses profondeurs. (12-3)

Joséphin’s disappearance allows him to come and go as he pleases, to remain suspended somewhere between life and death, ‘insaisissable comme le vent’, and confers upon him a sense of poetic freedom in the face of the social and linguistic hierarchization of difference: ‘C’était ma liberté a moi’ (28).

In both *Moi, l’interdite* and *La Vie de Joséphin le fou*, the physical transformation between human and animal occurs within the context of an already imposed dehumanization. These characters are rejected and expelled from their families and from the wider community because of their perceived monstrosity and madness, and the lack of compassion and the inhumanity that is directed towards them reveals the production of an intimate caesura within and of the human itself. As such, their exclusion from human society shores up a sense of civilizing cohesion, just

as they themselves are condemned to silence and to a bare existence. Yet, despite their submission to demarcations and divisions, Mouna and Joséphin are able to glimpse some semblance of freedom by entering in a closer proximity with their perceived otherness. Abandoning their human bodies enables a process of self-discovery in which the infinity and flux of experience are no longer easily recuperated to categorizations of difference. Becoming an animal may expose Mouna and Joséphin to death in the form of sovereign violence that is bound up with a multilayered postcolonial politics of exclusion, but, as we shall see, these are not definitive transformations from one position to the other: Devi's work instead presents hesitating hybrid creatures that are suspended somewhere between human and animal, life and death, whose fluid boundaries both resist and reinstate the laws of hierarchy and difference.

### **From a politics of exclusion to a poetics of vulnerability**

Mouna and Joséphin's metamorphoses expose the impact of the politics of exclusion on the experience of human life as such. Their dehumanization is bound up with the imposition of difference which has caused them extreme suffering and pain, and which is then seemingly alleviated on some level by embracing a radically different existence and a hybrid physical form, albeit one that participates in their very exposure to a bare existence. In describing *Moi, l'interdite* as 'une mise en garde contre la culte de la différence' (Mongo-Mboussa 2001) – a comment that is just as easily applicable to *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* – Devi does not invite a simplistic interpretation of these texts, however. The reader is not merely called upon to observe and to admonish the deeply entrenched hierarchies of difference at play in the

universe that she depicts, or to empathize unreservedly with her protagonists and their subjection. For Mouna and Joséphin are complex and ambivalent human-animals: despite their exclusion, they cannot be inviolably separated from the law, and they carry within them the very violence that they themselves are exposed to.

Despite the oblivion, silence, grace and grandeur that may be afforded by their animal existence, both Mouna and Joséphin cling to more recognizable forms of human life. Mouna roams beyond the limekiln with her companion and joins a pack of dogs, and even as she submits to her animal life on a physical level, she nonetheless retains a sense of affinity with humans. Unlike the others who are ravaged by hunger, she refuses to participate in devouring a young family, since ‘je savais, moi, qu’ils méritaient parfois notre pitié’ (93). Mouna’s animality is not one of simplistic or absolute transformation to instinctual needs and desire, then. She and her companion differ from the other dogs and instead exist in a state of vacillation between human and animal. In both characters Devi seems to suggest that this hybrid state affords an attentiveness to the suffering and vulnerability of the other that being either completely human or completely animal denies.

However, when Mouna and her dog companion return to the limekiln, starving and exhausted, her former memories suddenly return and she is repulsed once again at her animal corporeality. Covering up her nudity with her grandmother’s white sari appears to clothe Mouna in human perception, and she perceives her animal existence with abject horror:

Je me suis tombée à la renverse en me rappelant que je n'étais pas un chien. J'ai contemplé avec horreur mes poils drus, mes griffes, les croûtes qui s'étaient formées sur mes genoux et la paume de mes mains, qui s'étaient endurcies, puis se détachaient périodiquement en libérant une sève blanche, et je ne me suis pas reconnue. Qu'étais-je donc? Quelle créature étais-je devenue? Un bec-de-lièvre m'avait-il excisée de toute humanité? (102)

Mouna hastens to wash herself carefully, to rid herself of her animal claws, teeth and fur, and urgently recovers her former appearance. Not long afterwards, she ruptures relations with her dog companion, and meets Prince Bahadour of her grandmother's tales, a tramp who impregnates her and runs away. Killing her child, Mouna is then put away in an asylum, which is the place from which she tells her tale to a sympathetic listener, Lisa. If Mouna is drawn to recover her human form, then, this is in no sense a means of salvation from her bare existence. If her animal life can be read as much as being bound to abjection and debasement, as to possible modes of redemption and resistance, so too can her reacquaintance with human life. Mouna comes to the realization that the compassion, acceptance and belonging that she has longed for, and that she has glimpsed in her animal relations, is nowhere to be found in the human world. And she is driven, then, to murder her child out of love, to spare him the existence that she has endured, in the knowledge that he will follow the same path: 'Il irait par les chemins comme moi, mi-homme, mi-bête, pour être repoussé et rejeté de tous, chassé comme un loup-garou auquel on prête tous les pouvoirs, et qui n'a que celui de sa peur' (118). Mouna's act thus endeavours to save her child from the politics of exclusion, but even if it comes from a place of compassion, it is nonetheless inscribed within the very violence of effacement. Lisa is the only human

being who accepts Mouna's difference and listens to her tale, but to encounter human compassion at this point is utterly overwhelming for Mouna. As Devi has commented, 'Cette compassion, cette possibilité de rédemption arrive à un moment où elle n'a plus aucun espoir, aucune possibilité de vivre, et elle préfère détruire Lisa' (Ravi 2011: 275). At the end of the text, then, it is uncertain whether or not Mouna has spared Lisa too from the violence of this world, by effacing her just as she intends to efface herself (121-2).

*La Vie de Joséphin le fou* is even more unsettling in its depiction of the uneasy relation between compassion and violence, humanity and inhumanity. From the start of the text, the reader is aware that Joséphin has kidnapped two fifteen-year-old girls, Solange and Marlène, and that he has cloistered them away in his submarine cave. The girls are, understandably, terrified, though Joséphin cannot comprehend why, and he is saddened by their fear. Just as for Mouna, even though metamorphosis into an animal has afforded a welcome way out of human life, it proves not be sufficient. Joséphin never resolutely transforms and he is often compelled to revisit his former residence, the village of Case Noyale, even if he is fully aware of the reactions his presence will stir up:

Je poursuivais les autres parce qu'on a beau dire, on peut mourir de solitude, et la conversation muette des poissons suffit pas, on a envie d'entendre des voix, même les voix les plus tranchantes, celles qui sont faites que pour dire des moqueries et des insultes, ça fait rien, de toute façon c'est eux qui avaient peur de moi quand ils apercevaient mon ombre, j'ai pas des formes comme les autres, faut dire que je fais peur... (69)

Joséphin may prefer people to be afraid of him than to fling insults his way, but in the end he craves a human connection, and this is an impulse that leads him to capture Solange and Marlène. On some level Joséphin knows that this is not something that he should have done, and that it contravenes the laws of his community. 'Et je sais bien qu'en prenant Solange-Marlène je vous ai donné le droit de me détruire,' he admits, 'On agit pas comme ça, dans le monde d'en haut' (40). Nonetheless he is insistent that he has acted out of love. His reasons here resonate in some way with Mouna's desire to spare her child from the violence of the community. Joséphin claims that he wants the girls to share in his submarine universe, in the 'éternité bleue' (74) of the sea, so that they can avoid the stifling constraints, suffocation and heaviness of the adult human world (42, 59). In particular, he wishes to save them from what he sees as a female destiny, and from the life that he has seen his mother lead with various men in the village. Joséphin is convinced that by suspending Solange and Marlène in his fluid world, he will be able to keep them safe from the violence of masculine desire: 'Ils massacreront leur vie, s'ils le peuvent. Ils déchireront leur chair de coquillage, s'ils le peuvent' (64).

If Joséphin's actions are inspired by love, however, this is clearly not in the same sense as Mouna's compassion for her child. It is instead shaped by his own masculine desires, something that he appears not to recognize himself, though it is betrayed in the sinuous shape and form of his eel corporeality. The text is full of Oedipal resonances: from the metaphorical substitution of the sea for the mother's love, to more explicit references of sexual desire for the mother (16-7). The girls would seem to represent a desire to recuperate the primary lost loved object and to



experience a form of absolute fusion. Joséphin attributes the consistent rejection by his mother to the series of men in her life, and in kidnapping Solange and Marlène and keeping them all to himself, he wants to forge a connection that eradicates that sense of separation from the mother:

Je vous empêcherai de disparaître comme l'autre, commencée jolie puis de  
tonton en tonton devenue laide devenue pâle devenue chiffon de cuisine  
devenue papier sablé devenue clown, oh non, pas vous, pas toi Solange, pas toi  
Marlène, vous resterez ici protégées de tout et la mer sera votre vie. (45)

It is surely no coincidence that the names Joséphin has given these two girls reflect a binary polarization of femininity, one that would seem to correspond to his complex desire for his mother, as angel and femme fatale, la Marlyn. Ultimately, Joséphin's need to overcome his isolation and estrangement leads to the rape and death of these girls, to the very sexual violence that he claims to be rife and that he wants to save them from. In the end, then, Joséphin submits to the baseness of his human desires, becoming a stranger to the infinity and affinity of the sea, and ending up being devoured by the eels that had at first allowed him an alternative, though arguably equally abject, life to the violence of the human world:

Non, je ne suis plus qu'un corps étranger, blessé, immobilisé, et elles ont, elles, faim depuis longtemps, faim de ma solitude faim de ma tristesse faim de mon amour faim de ma trahison, elles flairent sur moi la souffrance des petites le parcours bestial la nuit innommée du pêcheur fou, et cela leur suffit: elles commencent. (88)

Like Mouna's parasites, the eels highlight the protagonist's exclusion from human life, but they also underscore the multiple counter-currents of belonging and difference within the animal world. Joséphin may live entirely as an eel but he is nonetheless contaminated by human desires. This depiction of Joséphin being ingested by the eels sets him apart as a 'corps étranger', marking in him his human difference that can be fed off, while incorporating and assimilating this very difference.

Devi's protagonist's metamorphoses can thus be read as fluctuating transformations that set in motion a more intricately charged exploration of what it means to be human, not only physically and perceptually, but also ethically in this postcolonial society that is structured through a politics of exclusion. The suffering and isolation that Mouna and Joséphin endure lead them both to commit crimes of 'love' at a point where it is impossible to confer a resolutely human or animal status upon their existence, and thus impossible to decide which, in the end, has been the more humane – or perhaps the less inhumane – of experiences. There is little sense of resolution as to whether the animal is to be regarded as the human's abject, debased other, or as a form of life that exceeds the human in its capacity for compassionate attachment to the other. Mouna and Joséphin seem to be at times suspended between human and animal, and at other times violently flung from one extreme position to another in a reiteration of absolute difference. If the human is a product of ceaseless division, this politics of exclusion not only impacts on Mouna and Joséphin from the outside: its violence is internal to their very existence. An act of compassion, then, cannot help but be inscribed within that very logic. Mouna and Joséphin's crimes may

be interpreted differently, of course. There is perhaps a clearer sense of Mouna's recuperation of humanity once she sheds her animal coat, and she appears relatively lucid in her decision to kill her child out of compassion. Joséphin, however, cannot distinguish dream from reality, and he appears to have no awareness of the violence of the crimes he commits. But, in both texts, Devi creates a sense of narrative undecidability which suspends the reader's judgment and compels her to bear witness to the very undecidability of the human-animal relation and to Mouna and Joséphin's exposure to, and assimilation of, bare life.

Both these narratives resist the composition of a clear, linear account. *Moi, l'interdite* is structured around fragmented episodes of Mouna's life: her alienation as a child in the attic with her grandmother, or confined in the limekiln, tales of Bahadour and Housna, the parasites, the dog, the tramp, giving birth to her child that she kills, time spent in the asylum, her friendship with Lisa, and finally her desire to set fire to herself. The various episodes alternate and intermingle, and boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred through the intertwining of Mouna's story with the legend of Bahadour and Housna. This flight into fantasy allows Mouna an alternative idealized version of reality, as her 'clochard' becomes a prince charming, 'vêtu de liberté' (104) and as she becomes a princess (106). Mouna herself seems unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy:

(Parfois, pourtant, un doute me vient. A-t-il été? Est-il vraiment venu? A-t-il dansé avec moi en ce matin des tendresses? Ma mémoire est si fausse. Cette incertitude est terrible. Je ne sais pas si je m'appelle Housna, née sur un tapis d'orient.) (107)

This narrative uncertainty necessarily spills over into the reader's encounter with the text. Telling Prince Bahadour/the tramp about her grandmother, Mouna shows him her sari, and they discover that the story of her life and of their relationship is miraculously written upon it (109). And Mouna suddenly realizes that, once he has finished reading, she will never see the tramp again: 'Je n'ai pas vraiment été surprise,' she claims, 'Sans doute, je l'ai su lorsqu'il a lu mon histoire dans le sari' (113). Mouna suspects that he abandons her after finding out the horrors of her life. But there is also the sense that once the reading encounter is over, the reality also necessarily ends: the act of reading, then, begins to take on a significance of its own.

In her compelling analysis of *Moi, l'interdite*, Srilata Ravi draws on Judith Butler's work on vulnerability and grief to argue that Devi's text creates an ethical space that implicitly involves the reader's participation. For Butler, we all live with vulnerability, 'a vulnerability to the other that is a part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt' (Butler 2004: 29). Desire, violence and grief open us out beyond ourselves, to an ec-stasis that reveals the ways in which we are 'undone' by the other. Rather than viewing grief as privatizing and solitary, Butler believes that it can be mobilized to think through questions of community from political and ethical perspectives. Grief, Butler argues, furnishes 'a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' (Butler 2004: 22). In Ravi's reading of *Moi, l'interdite*, she suggests Devi's writing mobilizes Butler's argument, in particular by allowing the narrator to expose her grief and corporeal vulnerability to

the reader while impelling her to recognize and share in that vulnerability as a universal experience. Further, Ravi draws on Butler's discussion of the Levinasian face to argue that Devi's writing enables Mouna at once to turn her face to the reader and to implore her to listen to her story, while at the same time highlighting the very unrepresentability of the face and of grief, by issuing such warnings as the following: 'Cette histoire couleur d'eau croupie n'a peut-être aucune réalité. Laissez-la s'écouler à travers la bonde de l'oubli. N'essayez pas de la saisir' (7). Ravi concludes that this unseizable story, in seeking to represent itself, can only attest to its very failure:

The text with its graphic effectivity returns us to the human where we do not find it, in its frailty and at the extreme limits of its ability to make sense.

Mouna's shared grief binds her loss with our incomprehension [...] It is through our own disorientation at the recognition of the vulnerable, in Mouna and in us, that she comes into being. (Ravi 2007: 156)

If Devi's stories reveal a politics of exclusion, her writing opens out a poetics of vulnerability that suspends the reader within the very fabric of the narrative. And this binding of the reader to vulnerability and unrepresentability that is underscored by Ravi's reading of *Moi, l'interdite* is played out in *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* on an even more ethically challenging level. Joséphin's narrative carries a similar sense of undecidability, with temporal dislocations and oneiric episodes gradually revealing fragmented pieces that relate the kidnapping of the girls, and are interspersed with the narration of his relationship with his mother and the events leading up to his eel life. Joséphin explicitly calls upon the reader to bear witness to his story from the very beginning, but, like Mouna, he is an unreliable narrator, teasing the reader and

holding back from absolute disclosure: ‘Vous raconter maintenant? Oui, peut-être. Elles dorment. Ou plutôt non, pas maintenant. Plus tard’ (15). The reader is consistently invited to share in Joséphin’s vulnerability, but she is also incited not to judge his crime. Joséphin insists on his lack of malicious or violent impulses in kidnapping Solange and Marlène, and if he highlights his innocent pleasure in merely watching them, he not only calls for a suspension of judgment, but also implicates the reader in a desire to capture beauty and innocence:

Si ce bonheur, c’est de les contempler chaque seconde tandis qu’elles dorment, jetées dans le sable, de regarder le soleil se lever sur leur joue ronde, de voir le sommeil s’appuyer sur le bleu de leur paupière, d’écouter le langage de leur corps quand elles s’absentent d’elles-mêmes, de surveiller les minuscules sursauts qui ponctuent leur repos, de guetter les hocquets qui restent lorsqu’elles ont cessé de pleurer, si c’est ça mon bonheur, qui peut me l’interdire? Pas vous, tout de même, pas vous. Car vous le partagez bien un peu avec moi, en ce moment précis, ce bonheur-là. Non? Sinon, vous seriez pas là. Vous seriez pas là. (41)

Throughout the text, and as we can see in this passage, Joséphin’s adoration of the girls slips between an innocent admiration of their child-like beauty, and their own innocence that he wishes to preserve and protect, and a more sexualized, predatory gaze that lingers on over the intimate details of their bodies. Joséphin is unable to communicate verbally with those around him, and he despairs at the impossibility of ‘se comprendre’ (58). When relating his past, his experiences with his mother, and with the community, his narrative voice takes on a child-like, innocent tone,

reminding the reader of his naivety. But when describing the girls, the narrative adopts a lyrical and poetic beauty that aesthetically draws the reader in, establishing an uncomfortable position with regard to how he responds to the girls, and forcing reflection upon the reader's own engagement in, and distance from, the text.

As the text moves towards its bloody conclusion, and as Joséphin undulates through the water, the narrative flows seamlessly between dream and reality. His dreams recount the idealized coral world with the two princesses he views as his own, whose innocence and beauty he is bound to protect from the threat of violence, such as the sharks that circle around him, but they also expose his unconscious capacity (and his fear) to inflict violence on these girls. Joséphin awakes from his dreams, nonetheless, to discover the brutal reality of Solange and Marlène torn apart and massacred:

Deux poupées brisées avec une brutalité de bête. Bras jambes en désordre, postures impossibles. Un os luit, clair, nettement déboîté. Cous marqués aux doigts griffus. Corps désacrés, massacrés, font eau de toutes parts. Font sang de toutes parts. [...] Pénétrées, profondément, par la mort. Transpercées par sa présence, par son aiguille. La mort est entrée ici, je sais pas comment, est entrée en elles dans leurs cuisses écartées, dans tous leurs orifices, pendant que je dormais. (86)

There is little sense of distinction between Joséphin's dream and the horrific scene that he supposedly merely happens upon. Narrating acts of violence within the space

of dreams allows Joséphin to awaken, to disavow his impulses as being merely unconscious and to encounter this violence with the eyes of someone who has not carried it out. And though there is little uncertainty in the reader's mind as to how these girls have come to be penetrated and pierced with death, the narrative flux allows the reader to share in Joséphin's shaky version of events and in the anguished grief of his 'discovery'.

As the narrative closes on Joséphin's body being devoured by the eels, this text opens out ethical questions for the reader that allow for an engagement with another aspect of Butler's work on precarious lives: whose lives are grievable? How do the cultural contours of the human impact on responses to loss and to mourning? Butler writes: 'If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated' (Butler 2004: 33). To the extent that both Mouna and Joséphin are already dehumanized by their communities, their effacement only repeats their always already foreclosed human lives. As Butler argues, 'Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark. There will be no public act of grieving' (Butler 2004: 36). Certainly there is no sense that Mouna or Joséphin's families or communities will grieve for them. But by suspending her protagonists within the perceptual and ethical flux of the human-animal, Devi incites her reader to attend to the vulnerability of these characters' lives and of their deaths. A sense of compassion, of grief, for these protagonists, especially for Joséphin, is often discomfiting for the reader. But in forcing the reader to confront assumptions about the cultural contours of the human



and about the precariousness of life, Devi's writing espouses a poetics of vulnerability as a basis for a literary ethics of the postcolonial human.

## **Conclusion**

In *Moi, l'interdite* and *La Vie de Joséphin le fou*, Devi presents highly complex, ethically charged and ambiguous representations of perceived relations between humans and animals. Mouna and Joséphin's metamorphoses take place within the context of a society in which they are always already dehumanized. Their transformations into dog and eel are enabled by a politics of exclusion that rests upon the intimate caesura: the socio-cultural possibility of the recognition, and the reaffirmation, of what is human through the demarcation within itself of what it is not. If Devi's protagonists are subjected to an abject animal existence through the violence of sovereign power, they nonetheless do experience moments, however fleeting, of redemption and salvation. Insofar as their hesitating, hybrid bodies collapse division and demarcation in themselves, they transgress the violence of their perceived difference, and would seem encounter moments of empathy and compassion through shared vulnerability in the animal world. Yet, the politics of exclusion that governs these human communities prevails: in the end, there is no wider sense of acceptance, belonging or redemption, and these protagonists' own acts of 'compassion' are bound to reiterate the dehumanization and effacement they themselves have experienced.

Nonetheless, both Mouna and Joséphin exonerate themselves of their crimes, and the reader thus is forced to confront assumptions about the cultural contours of the human in these texts in which their own capacity for ethical engagement,

judgment and distance, in witnessing the inscription and enactment of vulnerability and violence, is interrogated. Butler argues that:

To the extent that we commit violence, we are acting on another, putting the other at risk, causing the other damage, threatening to expunge the other. In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited. (Butler 2004: 29)

If Devi's writing exposes the violent exclusion of difference as a way of life in postcolonial Mauritian society, she calls for a literary ethics that recognizes the interplay of violence and vulnerability in the very shaping of the human. Beyond the politics of exclusion, Devi inscribes a poetics of vulnerability that not only exposes the precarious lives of her protagonists to her reader, but that confers an ethical injunction upon the reader to share in that vulnerability, and further to confront her own capacity for violence. Devi's writing thus discloses, on the one hand, the violence of socio-cultural divisions and demarcations, and mobilizes, on the other, a possible poetics of reconciliation. In *Moi, l'interdite* and *La Vie de Joséphine le fou*, writing opens out a space for a syncretic and synthetic vision of the postcolonial human, one that admits of difference without absorbing the other in its urgent and creative reimagining – and collapsing – of the perceptual, physical and ethical boundaries between human and animal. Devi's writing thus reveals the question of the

postcolonial human as being one of constant shifts and renegotiations. Her texts neither exclusively relegate the human-animal to an abject debasement, nor excessively celebrate the hybrid as a revolutionary figure. At times basely stripped of their humanity, at others tantalizingly transgressive, and often both, Devi's metamorphic protagonists are intricately and subtly bound up with the political layerings and divisions of postcolonial Mauritian society, all the while hinting towards a poetics of reconciliation that emerges in an acknowledgment of shared vulnerability.

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